



CONSTANT VIGILANCE

PROTECTING GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
ESTATE FROM FIRE

FIRE DURING WASHINGTON'S LIFETIME

On Christmas Eve, 1740, George Washington's family home in Fredericksburg, Virginia, was damaged by fire, and the family, including his parents and four younger siblings, were forced to spend the holiday in the detached kitchen. This incident made Washington, at the tender age of only eight years, keenly aware of the devastation fire could bring. During Washington's ownership of Mount Vernon, fires occurred in the stable, dog kennels and carpenters' shop. Washington's letters refer numerous times to the care needed to be taken against fire.

Washington responded to these fires by reducing the risk of their occurrence. He built a new stable and barns of brick, and he purchased a set of leather fire buckets. On plantations, fire buckets were the most important pieces of fire-fighting equipment from the 17th through 19th centuries. Washington's fire buckets were among the few original possessions that conveyed along with the property when it was purchased by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association from John Augustine Washington III in 1858. Each bucket held approximately 2 1/2 to 3 gallons of water or sand. These buckets stood ready for use in the detached servants' hall near the north end of the Mansion. They have remained on the estate and are currently on display in our Museum.



The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was founded in 1853 to save George Washington's home from the indignity of ruin. One of our primary obligations remains to ensure that the General's Mansion and outbuildings are safe and secure. As so many of Mount Vernon's original buildings are constructed of wood, fire is a perpetual threat. Our responsibility to safeguard these priceless national treasures impels us to install state-of-the-art fire-detection and suppression systems in all our Washington-era buildings, to ensure they survive for the benefit of future generations.

The fire-suppression system Mount Vernon will install has a proven track record of efficacy and reliability in reducing the impact of both fire and water damage in historic structures. This high-pressure system douses a fire using only one-tenth of the water that traditional sprinkler systems do. This is critical because, in historic structures, the water used to extinguish a fire can be as damaging as the fire itself. Rather than spraying gallons of water, damaging historic fabric and collections in the process, this system releases a fine mist that cools the fire itself, and the air surrounding it. By displacing in this manner, the fire is extinguished with very little water left behind. This type of system is currently in use in both Monticello and Montpelier, and will soon be protecting the Mansion itself.



HISTORY OF FIRE SUPPRESSION AT MOUNT VERNON

Even after the Ladies purchased Mount Vernon, they relied on water to quell any fires on the estate. Over the years, steps have been taken to improve access to water for fire prevention purposes. These included the construction of cisterns near the Mansion (1875) which were later updated with new pumps and enlarged (1924).

Henry Ford changed fire suppression at Mount Vernon forever with the donation of a fire truck in 1923, and an updated model in 1936. Ford's donation launched the operation of a fire department on the estate, and today, Mount Vernon has employees living on site that are trained as first responders for firefighting and other emergencies.

In 1985, Mount Vernon installed a gas fire-suppression system in the Mansion that now must be replaced with a new, mist-based system that is better-suited for historic buildings. We wish to extend the same level of protection to the outbuildings at this time.



HELP US MEET THE CHALLENGE TO PROTECT THE ESTATE'S 15 OUTBUILDINGS

Following extensive research, the Ladies have worked with experts to identify the best possible fire suppression system to protect the outbuildings. Work will commence as soon as we have secured the funds. The installation will be challenging, as we must preserve the integrity of the historic outbuildings while installing the systems. Pumps and supply pipes will be hidden underground to avoid marring the estate's 18th-century landscape.

It is vital that we install this state-of-the-art system as soon as possible to protect the 15 outbuildings—10 original structures (Spinning House, Salt House, Gardener's House, Storehouse, Smokehouse, Wash House, Stable, South Seed House, North Seed House, and the New Tomb) and five reconstructions (Greenhouse-Slave Quarters, Blacksmith Shop, Coach House, South Necessary, and North Necessary)—that dot the historic area.

“I have nothing to add at present but to beg you will make my people
(about the mansion house) be careful of the fire...”

—George Washington to William Pearce, February 9, 1794

Washington worried ceaselessly about fire, and our board and staff do too. With your generous support, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association will feel confident that we are being as vigilant as the General. We can rest more easily as we continue to preserve and protect the home of George Washington, maintaining the highest standards of preservation and care, while restoring his beloved estate to its 1799 appearance.

For more information, please contact the Development Department.

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GEORGE WASHINGTON'S
MOUNT ★ VERNON

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